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AUTHOR Green, Jean; And Others

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a compilation of summaries and comments made at this conference on disadvantaged young children. The discussions presented are centered around a number of educational issues. These include the importance and relevance of a child's environment on his academic success, attitudes concerning the proper way to educate children, the role of the family in a child's education and the importance of language in a child's development. Research projects dealing with compensatory programs in the United Kingdom and Belgium are described. The role of television as an educational aid is considered. Observations made by the conference members at on-site visits to various schools are recorded. Reports compiled by discussion groups at the conference dealing with parental involvement, intervention, and related topics are also recorded. Suggestions for improving the educational opportunities of ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged students are made and comments made by participants after the conference are presented. Lists of contact addresses, groups, and participating members are attached. (EB)

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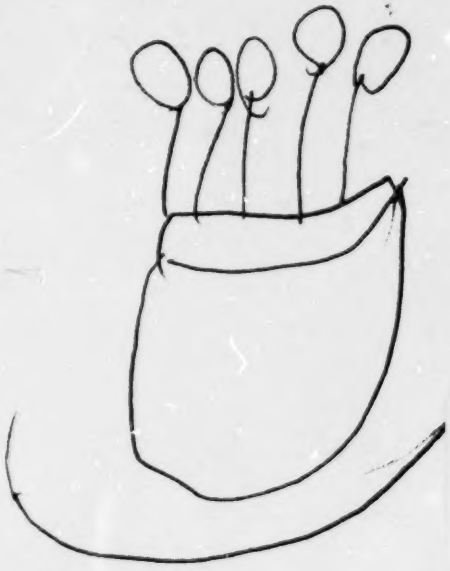

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Report on the Conference 'Disadvantage and the Education of Young Children' at Saffron Walden College, July 4-9th, 1977.

Conference aims

- **To create an opportunity to share diverse experience of disadvantage;**
- **To disseminate relevant innovation, action-research and good practice;**
- **To encourage European links between policy-makers, advisers, trainers and those in daily contact with the 3 - 7 age range.**

Contents

Foreword	p2
Victims of a destructive generation	p3
Contrasts in Disadvantage	p4
Spanning the Language Chasm	p6
Research projects in UK and Belgium	p9
Television	p11
Visits	p12
Discussion reports	p15
The Way Ahead	p20
Forum	p22
Comments	p23
Contact addresses	p26
Groups	p26
Participants	p27

Foreword

by Dorothy Day.

"We spent some considerable time thrashing around for definitions." This from a conference member would be fair comment on most gatherings of those concerned with the care of young children and it is vital that we continue to thrash around for clarity and keep our minds open to new interpretations, but at times, to help those involved in immediate practice, we must come down off our philosophical fence and state what we stand for.

1. We are concerned for the overall development of children from 0 and onward, and would wish to assist each child towards **self confidence, sensitivity, and his own learning potential.**

2. **Deprived** can mean a lack of some factor crucial to a child's future development, emotional/social; cultural; material; neighbourhood; school/playgroup/care situation. Living in high rise flats, lack of play space and play experience are examples of deprivation.

3. **Disadvantage** can mean that a) some children, owing to single or multiple deprivations, enter the educational system at a disvantage. Blame may lie in a number of areas but never with the child; or b) being a member of an ethnic or cultural minority may cause a child to be at a disadvantage although he has no obvious deprivation.

4. **Privilege** is a word used loosely - some deprived children are privileged in the love and security of their homes.

5. **Distress** is felt by everyone at some time. It can be exacerbated by deprivation but is an individual response.

6. The ideal for **parental involvement** is a partnership between parents, child and educators. This calls for positive attitudes and a total acceptance of the child and his family - and attitudes are more important than theory or methodology.

7. All those concerned with young children should be working towards **co-operation** which will provide greater continuity and enhance children's early development.

8. In order to **assess** what we do, gut feeling is not enough; we must keep a balance by using the objective views of researchers.

Victims of a destructive generation

"Society does not appear to want happiness but an increase in the Gross National Product" - angry words from the educational administrator who fought for the children in distress in the West Riding. Still fighting, still angry, Sir Alec Clegg, Chairman of C.E.D.'s governing body, opened the conference with a speech that reviewed his experiences of disadvantage, attacked the mistakes his own generation had made and warned against the damage being done to children in our civilisation.

As an administrator, he said, he had been able to observe the differences between successful and unsuccessful schools. At one time, too, childrens' needs had been seen in simpler ways, a minority receiving secondary grammar school education, and the remainder categorised into varying degrees of handicap. What had not been recognised was the number and range of those who were 'distressed' these, he said ranged from the mildly unhappy to the criminally violent; the Great British public even today does not accept this category and the diversity of needs within it.

What are the causes of trouble in young people? First and foremost, Sir Alec Clegg blamed his own generation, their behaviour, achievements and the education system that produced them. In the Western world, the rise in the adolescent crime rate is caused by much that is attributable to adults - the increases in family tension brought about by contraception, divorce and abortion which have changed patterns of family life; the control TV has over the young and again family life keeping children subdued and presenting them with images of violence; the building of high rise blocks - merely vertical versions of the old terraces; changes in family working patterns out of the need or desire for greater power of consumption; the priority given to tertiary education at the expense of primary and secondary; the decline in the quality of sport, because of the need or desire for money. **The background in which we are rearing children is one of destruction, violence and**

acquisition; the generation responsible for today's world is a destructive generation. They have also created a civilisation in which a black population is denied progress by prejudice and the distressed among them see prejudice as the cause; a permanent layer of commercially exploitable and unemployed youth is provided by the welfare state, and the physically defective are kept alive. Whereas once 90% of children accepted their lot as failures, now around 30% do not benefit from the education system and feel their resentment more intensely as a minority.

Sir Alec then went on to describe the characteristics of children and parents who are in distress. The children are found in large families of unskilled workers in poor housing conditions, and predominantly in the north and midlands; the proportion of children in overcrowded homes, of ill-health, in polluted air with no holidays, of parents unfamiliar with education services, unemployed, and unconcerned about school is greater in Wigan than in Bournemouth.

The main task of school,he stressed is to get a child to learn,which means removing pressures that are inhibiting the full development of his potential. Unfortunately, society does not appear to want happiness but the increase of the G.N.P. and in this people are allotted success in production and the sop of high wages, or repeated failure We have, he said, omitted enjoyment from schools, of which there are two types - the formal, imparting instruction, and the informal, with excitement, care and concern. The best schools know how to use the two approaches. Quoting a home-school liaison teacher in the West Riding,Sir Alec warned against the damage to the spirit that may be the result of our present civilisation and a far more serious charge to be laid against adults than lack of material care. What the child in distress needs is consistent,kindly treatment, continuity of care, a tolerant and accepting environment and a place to relax or to be boisterous.

In answering questions from the floor, he added that the junior school has it right, but there is still the wrong emphasis in secondary. What is important is to contrive success for every child; his definition of education is that it should make the best out of each child, and the best that is possible is exciting - this is what is going on at the infant and junior stage, and beginning at the secondary level, though as **Sam Johnston, Field officer of C.E.D.** pointed out, there, lip service only is still paid to the needs of the individual. This is because our society is concerned with the measurable.

On teacher training he felt that teachers should be trained in college, then work, and then re-enter a training period, and that all higher education students should have a period of employment prior to studying.

On allocation of resources, Sir Alec had no recipe for the country as a whole, but felt that a lump sum should be at LEA's disposal as it sees fit for the needs of the disadvantaged. He acknowledged the mistake that he had made of identifying disadvantage with poor housing conditions and emphasised that it was not money that solved problems but enthusiasm and dedication - education cuts are merely an excuse for inaction.

Contrasts in disadvantage

An eye for the minders

Hazel Wigmore, of the National Children's Centre, described how the Centre was set up in March 1975, utilising the wasted resources of the community in

equipment, furnishings and an under-used building, providing day care facilities for children of any age, with any kind of disadvantage. She also emphasised that it was not a question of providing more nursery schools or playgroups as these do not cater for the needs of the working mother. The NCC aim to plug the gap in the services already provided by voluntary and statutory agencies, and is short term, aiming to connect people to what is already available and to help them utilize their own resources. The NCC is a resource to bring people together into groups and the professionals are involved to enable that group to happen, not to teach, as child-minding is a very isolating job.

Mrs Wigmore asked whether the use of a child minder was a disadvantage or a resource. Childminders are a traditional part of working women's lives, where children are cared for within extended family and community, but increased mobility has changed the family responsibility. Considering that minders have a child at the optimum time for learning, both diurnal and developmental, the status should be high. Many have 40 children from birth to 5 to prepare for school. As their status is low they do not have the confidence to do the job well of helping the child to learn - they feel that it is the only job they are qualified to and can,do.

Through childminding the family and mother can be relieved of stress, the child can be enriched, cared for and have a warm, continuing relationship with a mother substitute; it can therefore be an advantage to have a working mother, if this means the child has access to better care, relationships and opportunities for learning and rich development. Considering the influence of minders on a estimated 250,000 children it is vital they have the assurance of professional status; they need training and support services such as free toys, books, transport, and bulk buying schemes. The NERDT is trying to lift the confidence of minders by the aggressive use of the media via the BBC programmes and local radio phone-ins.

Mrs Wigmore also asked for training for parenthood to take place in the secondary school, as the distance between school and parenthood is very short and young parents have no other way of learning parenting than in school.

On the road

Stewart Males, teacher organiser of a mobile gypsy unit in Herts described his job, which takes a 10' x 6' school- room in a transit van to approximately 3 - 400 children who are on the road-side and therefore not attending school. The Unit aims to reach the children who are outside the system, provide a stepping stone for the younger ones and an alternative for older children who because of the adult roles they perform at home have difficulty at secondary school. He and his wife operate three 1½ hour sessions, in which the children are provided with individual work folders which act as useful records for the teachers of the child's work, especially when long gaps in contact occur. The groups are visited twice weekly. Literacy is not on the list of priorities as the 90% of parents are completely illiterate and still successful, and sand and water play are not included; water is a commodity valued by the gypsies, not a play thing. Stewart Males and his wife organise reception class activities even for the older students, as there is no cultural barrier to enjoy what is associated with infants.

He stressed that the gypsy children have a superb childhood, a lot of care and strong family ties. They are used to remaining tranquil in small confined spaces, so use open spaces for energetic, free behaviour. "They go rather wild in open spaces". They are not accustomed to much peer group contact but to family hierarchies. The families' views of education and 'giorgios' are rather archaic and a large part of the Males' job

is talking and breaking down prejudices.

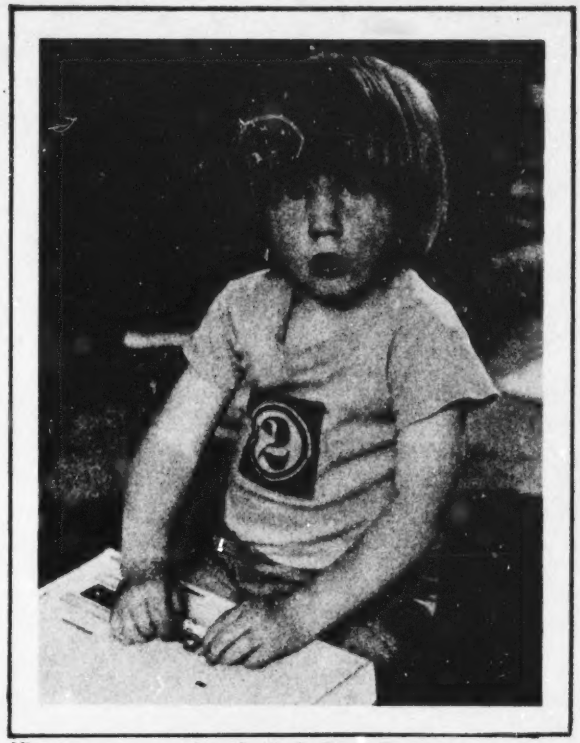
He felt that the function of education for the gypsies is not to make them the same shades of grey as everyone else. "We are not going to influence them a lot". The Gypsy culture will survive or die as it determines; it changes and adapts as it needs to. Some gypsies have become very acquisitive and materialistic; while others still live in bender tents with prams and bikes. Education is there for them to use as they need; no attempt is made to fit them into the giorgic world - "We accept them exactly as they are". The gypsies are indifferent to education but happy for a visit from an outsider who is neither demanding, nor threatening.

He ended by stressing that before any progress can be made in the education of gypsies, for their own needs, completely different attitudes on both sides are needed.

Reappraisal of privilege needed

Mrs Enid Turner is head of Homerton Nursery School, a custom built nursery feeding 11 different infant schools in Cambridge. The children come from very privileged articulate attractive homes with parents to match, which exemplifies the fact that deprivation knows no class barriers. Often both parents are heavily committed to careers, and academics working long hours or travelling away from home, making use of au pair girls and with little time, though plenty of money for their children. There is often emotional neglect, high expectations putting pressure on the child domination by strong personality and marital conflict. Many of the children are isolated from their peers but have extensive adult contact.

She recounted three case studies of children in distress as supportive evidence to the view that material provision is no advantage, but that ambience of the family is vital. One of the children was an elective mute, and another attention seeking. At least 1/5 of the children have similar kinds of behavioural and emotional problems which inhibit learning. She felt that what a school could do would be to provide continuity and closeness of relationships, which means spending time with the child, a difficult thing to do in the circumstances.



What can a school do? Mrs Turner felt that it was a matter of reaching the parents, which was virtually impossible in her locality in that there was no local catchment area or community of parents for quick visits. Changing the parents' image of the nursery school teacher so they might accept suggestions from that profession is difficult; professional hierarchies made the changing attitudes difficult. Supporting the importance of parents' role, a participant quoted the Court report which says: "The best way to raise children is to reinforce their own parents' ability to do so".

Spanning the language chasm

The common factor among non-readers said Dr Moira McKenzie is that they are in a state of cognitive confusion, and often methods of teaching reading only increased the confusion of the disadvantaged child.
Dr McKenzie, Warden of the Centre for Language in Primary Education, spoke during the afternoon on the nature of the reading process, and how children can be helped to shift from spoken language to written language.

Reading is interaction between the language patterns and expectations of the reader - in this case the spoken language, which has an intentional function, of the child - and the language patterns and expectations of the writer. The gap between the child's language and written language can be bridged by establishing a background of experience and knowledge, and a predicatable language structure that is common to reader and writer i.e. child and author. This is done by making beginning a story the same as coming to the end when a child knows the context, the events and the pattern of the plot. The child thus becomes a participant in the reading process focussing on the meaning of the story, not the words, and using his/her own language competence. It therefore means starting where the child is at the moment, helping him/her to recieve the language of the story into his/her own language, and see that books have something to offer. This is particularly relevant for the child who has a very different language from book language, where the language gap is very wide, and whose family is not aware of what reading and books can give.

In actual practice there are several stages of activity

1) **reading stories to the child in close proximity to what the child is involved with, the story, the book and the reading actions, as it is being read.**

2) **inviting the child to 'read' so that he is operating on a book in a particular way, focussing on the meaning and therefore the pleasure, using language and perhaps influenced by the author's language.**

3) **helping the child to focus on print.**

Thus the child moves from focussing on meaning to focussing on print. Dr McKenzie showed a videotape of the third stage of learning to read, where the girl, Michelle, had already grasped the meaning and was being encouraged to focus her attention on the printed word.

The child's way into the written language system is through his/her own language, in recounting and telling stories of his/her life. But so that the child can become "an autonomous reader" he/she needs to develop many strategies to decode written language, and move through the predicting, inventing and memorizing skills into word recognition and an understanding of language structure. The child's clues and strategies must be monitored so that the teachers can pick up the information from the child. They need to know how the child's system is developing.

The clues to be observed:-

i) knowing the context

ii) using the cueing system e.g pictures

iii) knowing the directional rules

iv) evidence of self correction

v) evidence of attention to print

vi) evidence of applying rules i.e. by generalising about word structures

vii) writing behaviour

Of use to the teacher are:- Marie Clay's 'A Diagnostic Survey', which used the book "Sand" to indicate what a child knows about print and book orientation, and various monitoring charts to record the development of the child's strategies.

Dr. McKenzie ended by stressing that the vital thing, especially with the disadvantaged child, is what the child already knows. "We must find out what he's got, otherwise we only add to his confusion. We must pay attention to his meanings and link them to our structures." If we do not do this, said Dr McKenzie, there is no way the child can span the chasm between what he knows and what we want him to know; when the children are left on the other side of this chasm "school just passes them by" and will continue to do so.

People without professionals

Brenda Crowe of the **Pre School Playgroup Association** introduced the screening of two films on playgroup work by stating that despite the production of endless reports, none of them are put into practice. She and **Joan Fazackerley** explained that as professionals are not helping people, people are helping themselves; playgroups and playgroup courses are run by unqualified mothers, making use of, but not dominated by, the professionals, who are not usually prepared to opt out of something they have begun, which PPA people are. The PPA is 'committed to the move-on principle'. The mothers take pride in the para-professional relationships they are creating; human contact, rather than professional expertise is what is valuable.

In the CTVC film "Parents in Playgroups" John Mullholland helps his son Gerald at the Brecon playgroup.

Stuart Andrew, aged 2¼ and his brother Roger appear in CTVC's film "Country Children".

One film **'Parents and Children'** showed how a playgroup affects the lives and development of mothers and children in Honiton, Devon and in Bootle. The other, **'Country Children'** was shown as a warning against a 'tunnel vision of deprivation'; Brenda Crowe said that it wished to question the assumption of the linguistic deprivation of rural children, by looking at the life of two brothers on a small farm in mid-Wales. Comments on the film from the audience such as 'quality of life', 'what a privileged family', 'so relaxed, there were no tensions', indicated the film had succeeded. Highlights were the silent watchfulness of the 2 year old boy in the village playgroup, the intimacy of the brothers and the whole family, the children's familiarity with life, death, animals, plants and weather. Mrs Crowe also stressed the value of early childhood as a time for slow sensory learning and for silence, a time which is in real danger as the school encroaches upon the pre-school years.

Research projects in UK and Belgium

Role of voluntary groups expanding

Because of increasing financial restrictions, voluntary groups are playing a much greater part in the care of the under fives. Wilhelm van Der Eyken, working on a SSRC funded research project, described the initial phase of the investigation which set out to discover the factors behind a family's non-involvement in voluntary early education.

Free playgroup facilities were provided by the project on a Hillingdon council estate, where there are 88 families with children of pre-school age and no provision in the area for those children. The families were personally informed of its existence, yet 40% did not use it, a figure which correlated exactly with Brown's study of the incidence of depression among working class women in urban areas. The project found that the **estate mothers were under stress to the extent where events external to the family are meaningless**, as the family is concentrating solely on survival. They concluded that depression not only affects the mother/child relationship to the detriment of the child's learning, but means compensatory provision is ineffective as it is not used. There therefore must be other strategies to reach the mother, and this was what the research was investigating. They included supporting childminding schemes, locally set up community nurseries and volunteer work such as Home Start.

Strategies are still needed, he said, to support one-parent families (which could mean involving industry in home-based work but without exploitation) handicapped families and families of an ethnic minority. A system of tying resources together locally is needed, such as a radio-phone-in or a telephone system (a la Samaritans); the role of refuges was to be taken into account. Of paramount importance, he concluded, was **the need for a family policy**, as developed in other European countries which would support the family in a framework that provides for every possible form of breakdown, so parents can do the job they want to.

Learning conditions of major importance

From the compensatory programme they had developed with 4-6 year old children in Ghent during 1970-73. Dr de Meyer and Dr Mervielde of Ghent University concluded that learning conditions are more relevant than content to scholastic success. The effect of the programme was also to further scholastic success faster, but there were temporal limits to this effect.

The original programme had been set up in the context of Belgian policy for the under-fives, where working mothers receive full salary for 14 weeks after the child is born. During that period nurses from the National Child Welfare Centre visit regularly, from once a week initially, to advise and inform and support. From the end of the 3 month period to the age of 3 years, day care, either in nurseries or by NCNC registered child minders, is provided. The fees in the nurseries are earnings related. From 3-6 years the children attend nursery school. Despite this national provision of care, children from working class families have more difficulty in the first year of primary school, and this is what the original compensatory programme was designed to help.

A new programme, the Ghent kindergarten project, was set up, following the development of a number of basic principles derived from the first research project. These were parent involvement, basing learning on the child's experiences, teachers' awareness of the objectives of the programme, extending the benefit to as many children as possible and communications through teacher meetings. They then described the programme objectives and content which took account of these principles in the activities - for example, the themes of the year's curriculum were based on the child's experiences, and the home work involved the parents and drew them into the school.

Left alone to learn

As part of a diploma course, Daphne Brown had made a study of two Bangladeshi brothers, to test out the assumption that children whose mother tongue is not English can pick up English when left to themselves among other children, and that the language barrier dissolves naturally and with time.

Suba was 6yrs 11 months, Asad 5yrs 6months on entry. During the period of observation, which was 27 hours with each child, she recorded mother tongue usage and developing use of English.

When it came to their own language Bengali, Asad's use increased, as would be expected in the egocentric phase, whereas Suba's dried up as he became more socialised. She noted that the children were isolated in school, and when they met on the fourth day, they conversed endlessly, exchanging impressions, giving each other confidence, but by the sixteenth they were silent with each other. Each time they used Bengali as social speech there were signs of frustration with their own language. She feared that the non English-speaking child's communication with his own family was damaged if the child could not use his own language, and that **if the natural development of the mother tongue was hindered or broken, it would be damaging to the child's language and thought processes.** The confidence that comes from speaking and hearing their own voices was vital to the five year old's ability to learn. 'They have a language' said Ms Brown, 'and should use it'. The language must have a place in school - for example the presence of parents and Asian staff means the child can hear his own language around him. No child can learn when he is not 'at home' or 'comfortable'.

As regards the picking up of English, Ms Brown noted that the younger child, under less pressure to use social language, practised egocentric speech while acquiring the second language, and concluded it was important a child should be allowed time for this. The children could only pick up English from their fellows and the adults and during the observation period there was an increase in the number of remarks made by the other children to Asad, but a decrease in the number made to Suba. Remarks made by adults to both increased. There was also evidence to show that other children even those who were bilingual and might be thought to feel language differences, regarded the non-English speaker as dumb, deaf and blind. **The 'picking up' may work, but it affects social relationships, and creates confusion especially when the child cannot predict or reflect in the new language.** She felt it was important that the non-English speaking child should find his own level of development, and this would give him the confidence to develop further. Force is damaging.

She then described how in her school the non-English speakers are helped to acquire bilingual confidence.

1) **The children who speak the same language are withdrawn for short periods to do something they can do together,e.g. sewing.**

2) **New skills are introduced slowly**

3) **There is a structured and controlled language programme within all activities - for example, the use of prepositions within movement work.**

4) **There are close links with all staff.**

Stories and storytelling provide a framework for experience and vocabulary building, as do cooking and clothes. All the children can exchange cultural concepts and habits, widen their experience and adults can be brought into the school. In one of the slides shown by Ms Brown, an elder sister was showing the school cook how chapatis are made, and Asian children are cooking an English style breakfast for the caretaker. The languages and cultures of Asians in the school are thus seen to be of equal value, and she ended by describing how an Asian family had shared a birthday party with the school by filming it.

Though non-English speaking children may pick up English, much damage may be done in the process, and time, confidence, structured language activities within the normal day's work, and a school willing to learn and accept from others are better ways of helping the child to acquire a second language.

Ms Brown's research is to be published by Cambridge University Press this year under the title "Language and Integration".

Television: learning aid, research tool or art form?

Hilda Wurr , Education Officer, British Broadcasting Corporation described how local television is being used to promote language development in pre-school and infant children.

The series 'You and Me' which was started in 1973, was set up because of neglect in the area of pre-school broadcasts. The programmes were designed to help the child to learn while involving the mother and emphasising the fun in learning. No attempt was made to teach the child to read, but the series intended only to act as a stimulus to language development and aimed at linking home and school and complementing both while trying to convince mothers of the use of cheap everyday objects and to make them feel able to help the learning of their pre-school children.

In an immigrant area the programme was discussed before viewing with parents, including fathers, and health and social workers. It was also found to be valuable in that it sparked off a community feeling for further needs in the field of language development, and has been an ongoing achievement spreading to other schools.

The media brought other faces into the classroom and provided techniques which teachers were unable to provide themselves. One warning came from Dorothy Day - while television can be helpful to a good teacher, in the hands of a bad teacher it can be dangerous.

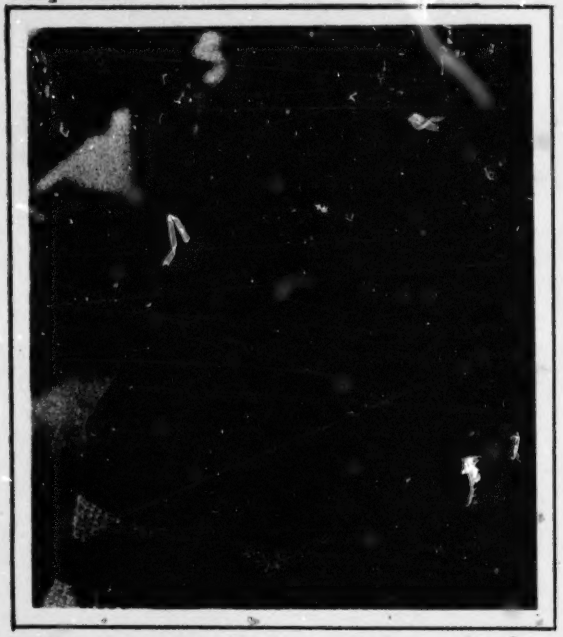
Alan Thomson, Director, Hertfordshire Educational Television Unit, took over the session describing television as a paradoxical tool for observation.

Little has been done in the field of research in the classroom using audio visual methods because it is a difficult and complex situation. Research started with tape recorders and progressed to video tapes, but the result has been disappointing. He stressed that audio visual methods will not replace the researcher, but can only be complementary, the best way being for the teacher to do observational work using audio-visual equipment as the tools.

He said that while television in the home fits into a time slot and is seen almost solely as entertainment, AV too can be expected to be a leisure time activity which it should not be. Television should be viewed as a form of art not to be confused with reality. It brings no real life situation to the viewer as any person is conscious of the camera and operator. He advised interested persons to look at Susan Lang's book 'Feeling and Form', and stressed that educators should endeavour to make children as critically aware of television as they are of literature.

Visits

During Thursday, July 7th, the conference had split into groups to visit some nurseries, schools and a playgroup in the locality. The group reported and commented on their visits in a full session on the following morning, Friday July 8th.



GROUP A had visited a nursery school in Newham. The nursery was a six year old building, with 40 places and eleven different languages spoken. It was well equipped clean and airy, and felt calm and caring. There was an awareness of language differences, and the head had decided that there should be one common language to help the new child with his/her language as soon as possible. For this reason no children speaking the same language were admitted as new entrants in the same week. There was also an awareness of the child's need for security, and new entrants were attached to one adult all day. There was a knowledge about all the children, and there was structure - equipment was well laid out and purposefully used; a box of over 100 different objects for language teaching was attractive and well used; there were files avialable for and used by the staff on Asian cultures, language development, recipes and cookery, and on music. The relationships appeared good - all adults were responsible for all children and moved around. Every week there was a staff meeting to exchange ideas and problems. Parental involvement was good - a notice on the door was in two languages, and a grandfather and father had been in school recently with their children. It was a delightful place.

When visiting the infant school, the group noticed the air pollution, the dirt and rubble. The canteen the children were eating in was an old classroom with brown tiling. The group entered the school apparently by an under-ground passage. There were classrooms on the left, little rooms on the right used as a kitchen, a laboratory, a language room and a home corner. The group couldn't see out of the windows, they were so high; the floor was wavy like the sea. The toilets were outside and away from the main building. There were attendance problems. However there was colour everywhere, and a string of parents and children pouring into school in the afternoon. A raffle for the local playgroup was being organised by the head, and the children were happy and responsive.

Another member of group A reported on her visit with the pre-school home visiting teacher attached to the infant school. The scheme had struck her as very well organised, fitting well into the community, mainly because "everything had grown slowly". The head teacher had established a play group with local mothers, holding weekly meetings with them out of a concern to help the non-English speaking mums and children not getting a nursery education. Quoting from a paper by the home visitor the group member stressed "the supportive nature of the programme, involving the mother as well as the child". The home visitor had described her task as "to emphasise to the mother her role as an essential learning agent in the child's early years, and to support her in this, point out the relevant and valuable educational experiences latent in day to day domestic play activities, to present these ides systematically through the visits". She then described the visits she had made in which various activities such as word matching games, seed planting, painting and conversation throughout were initiated by the home visitor.

GROUP B had visited two schools in Hitchen; the first, a nursery school in pre-fabricated buildings, well equipped with plenty of play space and with a multi-racial collection of children, left the group with some serious questions. The head had been very confident and sure of her objectives which were to instill in all children the love of Jesus Christ. There was not a scrap of evidence that any account was taken by staff of the Asian or Caribbean background of so many of the children. The responses to the groups comments on the value of such an interesting mix of cultures was only to refer to the love of Christ and the reading of the Bible. The staff appeared to follow this pattern closely and there was no evidence of any initiative. The ethos was missionary and patronising; "the children are privileged to be here"; parents were only involved in outings or called in to support events; they "really do distract". As regards language development they observed very little adult/child interaction, and music was very formal. The group were left wondering "How do we reach people like this" whose narrowness of views and outlook may in fact be creating disadvantage, when they have to cope with children from so many cultures.

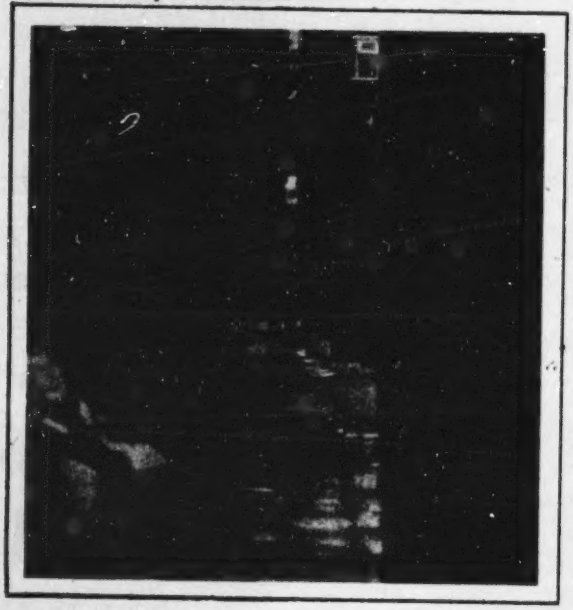
The second school was a junior and middle church school with 46% minority group children. A recently built nursery unit was attached but separately placed. Parents were in and out of the school; the head was concerned to bring the community in, to take the children out, and concentrated on language development - There were meetings to plan the week's thinking, flow charts were used, and to one group the head stressed that reading was taught at the infant stage - a fact that the group found worrying.

There were interesting differences between the split groups' findings at the school, implying that the morning visit influenced the afternoon's by affecting the school's reactions. It would be useful, it was felt, if the schools could be more thoroughly informed as to the purpose of the visit and the nature of the visitors. In this way, too, the group visit scheme might help CED in its work.

GROUP C had visited a nursery unit and nursery school in Letchworth. The school, custom built, due to parental effort, in lovely surroundings and fee-paying, had been set up to offer "a head start for life". Parental involvement extended to a management committee, a support group, meetings at the school for films and a home-visiting rota. The children appeared tentative, fearful and ignored the visitors. It was suggested that they had so many educational toys at home, they were unable to play with anything unless it could be recognised as such. The head teacher said the parents were solving their own identity problems in conformity, which meant the children were unable to show initiative.

The nursery unit had been built by the local authority in a hut in the playground of a large primary school; it was free to all and the social mix was 'splendid'. Expectations of the unit varied, from gaining freedom from the kids for a while to "a few New Statesman - type approaches". Thirty children attended in the morning, 30 in the evening, five days a week. The teacher made sure to meet parents and children on arrival, and also suggested that if parents are around they can observe and pick up the way children are being treated. Visitors were seen by the children as a new resource to be explored.

Both schools had 1 teacher on Scale 2 and 2 NNEBs; there was concern in both to bridge the nursery/infant gap, and the "You and Me" programme was shared; in both schools the children spoke English. The advantages of the first school lay in the comfort of the building and the homes, in financial security; the advantages of the unit lay in that the children came from a real family community where they were "loved, hated, punched, and cuddled". The group member ended by suggesting that a way of combating disadvantage if that means narrowness of choice and of experience, is exposure to experience not found within the life-style of the pupil and therefore children would benefit from swapping areas and provisions.



THE GROUP D, which had visited the playgroup, reported it had been a great learning experience for them. Firstly it appeared to be 'all about mothers' - the play group had been essential to building up confidence; the Belgian visitors linked the play-group movement with the liberation of women, especially of the working class. The playgroup may be a solution to the gap between school and family culture and to the difficulty of parental involvement; it is especially a natural way for a mother to find fulfillment. Secondly, they observed the impact of the mothers' development might create tensions in the home, calling into question the role and status of the father, who could also be involved in the playgroup with older children. Thirdly the group noted that the children seemed to be shy and suffering from lack of male contact, and finally suggested that the playgroup movement might become a form of permanent education.

GROUP E had visited an open plan primary school catering for 250 JMI children, built and opened in 1974. It was bright, light, hot, and cramped, dominated by low rise and high rise flats. The main catchment area was two high rise flats and the block, The school was an integral part of the whole construction of the estate. It looked bare as to play space and was over-looked by the flats to such an extent that privacy for the staff and what went on in the school was impossible. The headteacher said that the windows had to be closed when discussing the children as staff could be overheard by flat dwellers. Also whatever problems occured in the daily lives of the flat dwellers were taken out on head and staff before they had time to cool off.

The following observations were made:

1. Marvellous pottery work.

2. Good lively children's art work on display.

3. Photographs of schools activities, jubilee activities.

4. Words and pictures on languages.

The first objective was language development, to get them talking; a second language was not seen as dis-advantage.

5. Young staff chosen from scratch, and balance of a few mature family women in ancillary staff.

6. No special treatment of children with language difficulties - children were treated as individuals taken from the stage they have reached.

The following points were made about parental involvement in school; there were strong social reasons, over-riding others, for not involving ther in reading or maths.

1. Coming in to help mix paints and reading books.

2. Welcome to come in to talk any time. The head saw her role as being a counsellor but not a social worker. Communication with social worker and health visitor was good.

3. Liaison with some - through Educational Visitor - all new parents visited and in as a group twice a week. Parents and children were welcome in classroom, toys were borrowed and talked about.

4. A cup of tea would be provided in the staff room if necessary but there was no special parent area. As many as 50 or 60 parents came into school per day. The head would have liked a three-session day community school.

5. The parents make things for bazaars and help in a number of practical ways. There was obviously an exceptionally good fluid constructive relationship with parents.

6. For 2 yrs Keep-Fit classes had been run for mums by P.E.Teacher.

Children did not over react to visitors, but had ability to carry on concentrating, and were interested enough in what they were doing. It was very quiet in Junior section, noisier and more active in Infants. The head could deal with non-accidental injury procedure by making herself a nuisance at the clinics if necessary. She commented that Doctors tend to say accidental to most cases. A holiday playscheme had been set up to help parents to cope in holidays with children.

Discussion reports

On Friday afternoon, the discussion groups, which had been meeting during the other days, presented the themes main ideas and questions that had arisen out of their small meetings.

Our discussion started from Mrs Wigmore's talk about the work the National Children's Centre is doing with the childminders. We questioned how much could be expected of childminders, in terms of professional and of emotional commitment to the children. **A high standard can probably not be achieved without giving childminders a para-professional status, a regular job and wage and support services.** A network of registered childminders linked to other child welfare services already exists in Belgium and works satisfactorily.

We then discussed the preparation for parenthood in secondary schools. **We felt it was important that this should be given status as a subject:**

a) **by giving it separate standing**

b) **by offering it to all the ability groups,** not just those labelled 'disadvantaged' and not just to girls. It may include practical experience. e.g. in a playgroup, but it is essential that this is well prepared for, so that the students do not feel at a loss and reinforce their own negative self-concept. It is also important to provide training for the teachers of these courses, who may well lack pre-school experience and be unsure how to approach the subject.

After asking about nursery provision in Belgium, we discussed the pros and cons of providing a range-scale average, with lower standard of staffing and resources, or maintaining limited high-quality provision. Some members felt that limited provision tends to accentuate disadvantage as the children in need of nursery experience may well not get it and that blanket provision might reduce the gap. Others were worried about the effect of lowering standards,

for example by asking teachers to take on large numbers of the under 5's with inadequate preparation and facilities. There is also the difficulty that part-time nursery education is no help to the working mother, who often may not see the sense in paying twice for a childminder and a playgroup, for example. Though it may help the minder to use a playgroup, some young children may find the extra strange people too much to take.

We compared the work of health visitors in Britain and Belgium and agreed that they were in an ideal position to integrate the various services for the mother and to spot problems early - if their case loads were not so heavy.

We discussed difficulties in the process of learning to read and agreed in general that the method was less important than the attitude and conviction of the teacher. We discussed readiness to read, and whether children who were keen and trying to read before school age should be discouraged. We felt not, but with the proviso that the keennessto read was coming from the child, not the parent. One member of our group felt strongly that it was dangerous to encourage children to 'read' by a process of memory and invention to think that this was really reading, since if they do not move on to real reading, they will become aware of the gap between what they are doing and what they should be doing and will become even more frustrated.

We started our last meeting by discussing the use of television in schools and agreed that the use made of the 'You and Me' programme in the class we saw was ineffectual. The child who saw it with his mother obviously gained much more from the programme and we thought that a programme like this should have been shown in school to a maximum of 3 or 4 children.

We felt that although these programmes were intended as a resource to be related to the teacher's own work, many experienced teachers would not be able to use them properly.

We discussed the organisation of the group discussions which we felt had been left too open. Our discussions have tended to explore immediate reactions to the speakers, but we felt that we might have achieved more by having specific questions to consider - such as those outlined in the conference priorities.

One member suggested that we should have been trying to pin-point the attitudes in disadvantaged children which make a positive contribution to overcoming their disadvantage and the attitudes in teachers which contribute to this too.

We discussed the purpose of parental involvement in playgroups. Is this designed with the main aim of helping the children or helping the mother? Some members of the group were worried that playgroup involvement was seen mainly as therapy for the mother and could be a rather selfish process. They were anxious that the children's needs should have first consideration. Others pointed out that something which helped the mother might well help the child, because of the mother's increasing confidence and relaxation. We talked about the age of admission to play-groups and nursery school, as one member felt very strongly that 2 year olds should not be admitted unless special provision was made for them. However, another member felt that this could be a solution in cases where the 2 year old was felt to be at risk, as in many areas there is not one to keep an official 'eye' on the 2 - 3 year old who no longer attends the clinic and is not yet able to go to nursery school. This is again an area where integration of professional services is very important.

It appears that the group is very mixed in its members and the expectancy of the subject under discussion. We did not begin to make any progress until the last few minutes of the last group meeting. Would we have done better with more

time? Did we miss the cancelled session?

Sir Alec provided considerable stimulus as also did Stewart Males who was in our group. The early talk revolved round and round two points of tension.

1) **Are certain people disadvantaged or privileged?** for example: ethnic minorities, travellers?

2) **How far can deliberate intervention go?** There are many heads to this question:

   a) Is 'natural' development better?

   b) Self help and expert help

   c) Where are the boundaries if any, of educational intervention?

   d) Is intervention necessary or indeed, morally right?

All this debate went on against an unspoken assumption that something must be done and indeed cases were quoted - despairing Mums in tower blocks.

When we began to focus our thinking more tightly, it appeared that there were different emphases about priorities:

   a) Social and personal development and in particular a belief in the rightness of mothering in this process.

or b) the equipping of young children with basic skills offered by schools.

or c) both these in some form of interaction.

There was agreement about the need for confidence, for trust in others, for an optimistic world view on the part of children and parents, 'For the courage to be'. This is so whether or not we supported the Illich-like view of self-generating groups of like minded people in the community
or saw that some disadvantage could only be helped from outside the immediate situation. We began to look for the source of this happy psychological state of mind, pushing back towards the earliest child-rearing practices and beyond to pregancy and preparation for parenthood.

Happiness was mentioned but personally I doubt whether our pursuit of happiness should be so frenetic. Maybe it just happens when we least expect it.

Certainly we were impressed by an anecdote about Halsey who told his home community workers to beware of the syndrome that blames a headache on the government. Perhaps some problems in life are necessary and certainly inevitable, and learning to live through them is an important part of learning.

Mr Thomson's talk about the point of view of the camera gave us an image to make clear the feeling we had that much of what we believed about disadvantage may be relative to where we stand.

We want to say very strongly that we and others have been using disadvantaged and deprivation interchangeably and not properly.
May I ask a question? Would you be prepared to say that deprivation is a condition where someone has been prepared by forces beyond his control (or that of his family) from acquiring some essential human asset; but a disadvantage is a less serious condition which surely means that in some particular situation a person has a handicap before it starts. The point being made that he may not want or need to make progress in that particular situation. We returned many times to the condition of some travelling children who rarely wash and smell mightily. Are they at a disadvantage or is it only when society forces them into unfamiliar situations like school that they become disadvantaged?
We started to break down disadvantage into different parts: social, physical, emotional, intellectual. Perhaps if we had had time we might have added economic, political, spiritual aesthetic and so on.

Some of us felt that although we asserted that there are all sorts of camera angles on disadvantage - pluralism, relativism etc., in education, we had the makings of a particular view-point. We ought to nail our colours to the mast and say this is what we stand for: e.g. literacy, numeracy, thinking, good personal relations. (This list is unrefined). We can then offer what we believe is good and worthwhile to any who have disadvantages in any of these respects.

This led finally, to doubt the possibility of genuine education where the State compels it.

Apologies to the group for omissions, additions and distortions.

We began by agreeing that disadvantage is not a euphemism for poverty, and started talking about disadvantage in various ways; in two minutes we were onto general problems of interrelationships between those who teach and those who are taught and the community they are in; the special disadvantages were just special from our point of view, but in many cases what we saw were extensions of normal practice, and special difficulties simply because there were special difficulties there, not particular to the schools or the locality.

We saw the dangers of confusing disadvantage with the way we talk about people of different cultures, and started to think that different cultures meant different colours, or foreigners, without remembering that some of the things we were thinking of were the sub-cultures within our own indigenous society, which led us to think how did teachers and school relate to that society?

We wondered whether teachers were really changing their understanding of society as quickly as society was changing itself. There were many teachers relating to a society that was not there now because it was in the past, though may be that past was only a few years ago. We wondered whether there was a danger of imposing standards in a school or having standards - somebody said that was a good thing - but were they always to be the standards of the teacher? Were those standards necessarily relevant to the life of the people in the community? It concerned us that teachers should be very very much aware of this and study the community in which they work. We came to the conclusion that teachers, while good at giving instructions, were not so good at standing back, at observing what the situation was before they could come to a solution.

We saw the problems in school when teachers were trying to deal with disadvantage, of perhaps the teachers being esteemed according to the academic success of the children they were dealing with, but in their professional esteem, in their social esteem within their field, sometimes this was confused.

We came to the old argument - are sufficient graded posts going to those teachers who are dealing with children who are not going to shoot straight to the top of the school? There was argument and counter argument about graded people going out of teaching, but equally important was that many teachers who go out of classroom teaching do in fact go into a post where they are having a strong influence on new teachers in the field - which is very good indeed.

We came back to cultures and the characteristic of equating the fact that people come from a different culture as a disadvantage in itself. Is the best thing to do to make them like us was a question we asked, though not in so many words, and isn't it true that while there are these deviant cultures they inevitably cause stress in the mainstream.

I think that these were the main points of our discussions, but we did also talk about the work of the teacher within the school, within the area and community, and that teachers, who are after all going to be at the sharp end, or the blunt end of the business of education, might be part of projects, but have not the faintest idea what these projects are about; might be asked to do things, and never have the faintest idea what happens afterwards.

We were very aware of the fact that we must always, as teachers, relate ourselves to a community and really understand the world as those who come to us understand it, and that perhaps, with the best reason in the world, they don't put education at the top of their list.

Our group discussion focussed on three things - the notion of disadvantage, on action to alleviate it, and on the implications for the professionals.

In the first point, we spent a long time talking about different viewpoints and diverse experience of disadvantage, and one working definition emerged which we liked - Wilhelm van der Eyken's notion of families under stress.

So what is being done about it? There are a variety of projects and people from many different fields - for example, the members of the group represented the pre-school play groups association, curriculum development, and research. The danger is that one tends to put one's profession before the work; **everyone has to be loyal to one's profession or institution and it can get in the way of one's work**; for instance, in Cambridgeshire the idea of the community college was developed that the school should give the lead and many others took this line, that the school would do things for the community. The difficulty is in combining a shared view among the professions. There is first of all, need for shared information especially in the disadvantaged area. This already exists in Suffolk where the county authority initiated co-ordinated planning. Secondly there is the need for shared action, for co-ordinated action - this is the central point that our group was trying to bring out - the difficulty arises when our professionalism gets in the way.

This has tremendous implications for professionals. First of all this means learning the boundaries, not only between professions, but between professionals and non-professionals, as in the PPA; it means **a reassessment of professionalism**, so that they and the non-professionals work together and must include a definition of what a professional's role should be. Secondly, there is the need for sensitivity to the problem of how to help; for example, there is the old saying in France that before one gives charity, one has to beg for forgiveness. **If we are giving professional charity, we have to learn how, when and when not to give, which is very difficult for professionals.** The third point in the discussion of this new professionalism is that if we are to work together, to share information and actions, we must have a common aim. What is it? **We defined it as helping a community to develop in a healthy fashion, which means being sensitive to the needs of the community.** The people in it will define their needs and will define the action, and this is the basis of the aim of professionals working together, that they recognise a need outside themselves. We may be discouraged by people like Illich and Goodman who despair of schools and say you can't do anything, the institution will get in the way, there's no room for professionalism, the people should do it themselves. Our group would say No. Certainly you must help people help themselves, and perhaps there is a **greater need than ever for professionals who must be informed, and must be humble i.e have concern for truth and learn from each other.**

The last thing I would say on this point of developing the community is there must be an ideology, and we suggested that this is to do with **holding the balance between the needs of the individual and the needs of society.**

So looking ahead we felt there is room for optimism; this getting together, that is happening particularly in the area concerned with the under-fives, can be extended, this pooling of resources, willingness to assess and change roles in response to the needs of the community outside itself.

Finally, if this is what is happening, that valid strategies to enable professionals to work together meaningfully for people are being developed, does this not apply to everybody, and isn't the implication that the definition of disadvantage must be widened. Isn't everybody disadvantaged? We hoped this was something the Centre would think about.

The way ahead

There is international agreement, said Dorothy Day, opening her talk on Friday evening, on the importance of early childhood and the needs of young children who are, or appear to be at a disadvantage on entry to school. Certain groups, eg from large families are likely to be at a disadvantage, but not all, and not only from those groups; however, certain groups and areas can be predicted as more likely to be at a disadvantage.

Dorothy Day said it was her conviction that given certain **minimum rights** children will be able to more than survive.

These minimum rights are:

1. appropriate health facilities and physical care.
2. love, acceptance, praise, emotional security - she emphasised acceptance of the child whatever its state at birth or on entering school.
3. adequate socialisation via peer group relationships.
4. adequate play facilities.
5. continuing experience in the use of all senses to ennance learning.
6. adult interaction to encourage learning.
7. continuity of standards, values, expectation, love and care.

For the minimum needs to be fulfilled there must be parental involvement, continuity and co-operation, which Mrs Day said, are still lacking. "There are more severe gaps in these areas than I realised".

Parental involvement is agreed to be vital, but still does not exist in some infant and nursery schools, nor in health clinics and social services departments. The gap between professionals and parents is still enormous; off-putting notices are still posted; schools are still threatening for many parents. Parental involvement neither means a cliquey PTA raising funds, nor using parents e.g. in the Christmas Play, nor meeting them only by appointment or on formalised occasions, nor thinking parents need educating.

Partnershipis the key word in parental involvement; "parents are part of our learning resources and we as teachers have something to learn from them". Our aim should be **to enable parents to be the best that they can and want to be.**

Continuity of standards, values, expectations, love and care is also essential and discontinuity is particularly strong in education, both vertically and horizontally. Horizontally the child can be confronted with the contradiction in the above elements at home, childminders, extended family, nursery school, health clinics, social worker and infant school. Vertically there is a discontinuity between the home, the childminder the playgroup the nursery school, junior school and secondary school.

She noted that there is enormous diversity within and between the authorities who care for the young. We therefore need to build co-operation into the provision. She talked of the "pre-school battleground" between people competing over the care of the same children - professionals and volunteers, local groups and national organisations. Co-operation is needed between professionals and non-professional groups, between departments, between voluntary agencies, between individual projects and within and among all.

In departments she stressed there is frequently co-operation at the bottom and only lip service at the top. Here Mrs Day regretted that at the conference there was so little representation from the Social Services. "If there is no co-operation, there is not much hope for the pre-school child", and this means little hope for the teenagers and parents to come.

She outlined 4 main handicaps to the achievements of these minimal needs. The **system and structure** of society is one, and here she was 'staggered by the proliferation of departments with care of the under fives'. This and secondly the **complexity of problems** produced by society - flat dwelling, estate dwelling new towns - still remain. Thirdly, **the complexity of**

us as human beings causes parochialism, and over professionalism. Fourthly, she stressed that **the feeling of sentimentality towards the disadvantaged child** - the poor little thing attitude - does the child no good; what is needed is care, love and honesty regarding his cognitive and affective development.

Looking to the way ahead, Mrs Day said that there is no excuse not to proceed towards change in the area of care for the young. **If we get it right now, there will be less need for crisis intervention at a later stage.** Children in similar situations are at more or less of a disadvantage depending on the allocation of resources and local authority policies - the "terrible diversity of provision" is something that must be corrected. Some LEA's have not used their nursery grants appropriately, and there are authorities who do not provide ancillary helpers, or nursery assistants in primary schools.

She made strong recommendation that the government should allocate money specifically for a certain age group. Local authority departments should co-operate in the setting up of provisions. The planning department in particular should consult with those who know before housing estates are built - as far as young mothers are concerned, these have been 'criminally badly planned'. More attention must be paid to the resources in which a community is rich; there is too much waste of buildings, and of people, such as other people's grandmothers and fathers, and teenagers.

There must be a propaganda campaign to educate the great British public in to seeing the needs on their doorstep; unless they are made aware, money will not be available for the greatest need - the care of and provision for the 0 - 7 year olds.

COMMENTS

In discussion participants clarified the meaning of parental involvement. The conflict of values, part of the discontinuity mentioned by Mrs Day in her talk, stemmed from the attitudes of heads and teachers to parents, and the attitudes of parents to school. Teachers should not question parents, nor use them, nor see them as making demands, but learn from them, and take from them in mutual discourse. Several participants reminded the group that parent and teacher discourse is only a small part of the child's community and that there are many more adult environmental influences than just parents and schools. Working together is also a tremendous strain and therefore mutual respect and tolerance for others in the community are vital. It was also suggested that the development of personal relationships was not too strong a phrase to use in achieving changes of attitudes.

Forum *School versus community?*

The first part of the final discussion ranged widely over the aims of education, the role of the school, and the attitudes and role of teachers, and illustrated the split in standpoints at the conference between those who saw the community as a resource for improving the child's success in school, and those who saw the school as a pool of expertise and a resource for the benefit of the community.

It was suggested that education is to equip children to cope with and in the mainstream of society, especially the disadvantaged child who is further outside the mainstream. Education should aim to 'give the child the paintbox not the painting', but it was also felt that educationists should ask what we want for people, and that this is a sense of value, the ability to choose to change and the development of the individual's own powers and needs so that he is supremely confident of being himself.

Set against these aims of course are the demands that society makes upon the school, where a certain conformity is expected as the result of education; yet it was felt that the school is not doing its job if it "kills off" the development of the mastery of all kinds of skills. How do we therefor diversify the mainstream (which is evolving anyway), to include what those outside have to offer? A real choice is essential, but the child has to be able to cope with choice before being able to choose. It was suggested that schools and teachers are the creators of disadvantage in that people are excluded through lack of flexibility and acceptance.

There is a need therefore for a real readiness, in schools and teachers, to accept "the differing virtues", so that choice is left as wide as possible, and value is given to all. Teachers were seen as very important not only as regards their attitudes to children and parents, which can be more important than language differences and can create disadvantage, but in the variety and quality of experience and behaviour they provide. If personal relationships are so vital to the development of

the child at a disadvantage, then it puts enormous strain on the teachers if they are seen as, or feel themselves to be the only influence on a child. However, other people than teachers can help in the development of the individual. Even if the school does not provide appropriate resources for the child, there is the rest of the community. It was suggested at the end of the session that we, as educationists, must not carry the banner; **schools are only one of the resources that a community needs to help the people within it identify, resolve and cope with recurrent problems.**

The final session of the forum discussed how research can be of service to practitioners.

What researchers have to offer it was suggested, is a particular set of values which include honesty and a dispassionate approach; they also have evaluative and data collecting techniques, and the equipment to provide clarification and a long overall view to practitioners which should help in decision making. Researchers can offer the art of judgment. This appeared to involve teamwork, i.e. the questions are provided by the practitioners, and the information for the answers and the action can be provided by the researchers. It was stressed that research must be linked with the community, and that the mystique must be removed "If it

cannot be explained to ordinary people there is something wrong with it" said one participant. Here again there was a plea for co-operation to bridge the gap of trust between practitioners and researchers.

The other theme of discussion was the value of the case study as opposed to a wider area study, for example of new estates. The danger of the case study was that it might not be transferable, that involvement affected judgment. As one participant suggested "we've built a whole education system on a few Swiss children". On the other hand the case study provides insight, and can be more relevant to practitioners in its grasp of reality - it is personal and not abstract. At the end of the discussion participants agreed that it was dangerous to attempt to repeat specific research projects and to transfer materials, but these could still be of value to teachers' development.

Comments

After the conference, we asked everybody if they would like to contribute an individual response to the week's discussions. The following are a selection of the comments and criticisms.

"Following the planning meeting earlier in the year I came to Saffron Walden with high hopes of an interesting and profitable conference but I became more and more disappointed and frustrated as the week progressed. Somehow and somewhere the conference lost its way and I soon had the impression that nobody really knew the purpose of the conference. One reason, I think, was that apart from one or two instances the contributions bore little relationship to the title of the conference 'Disadvantage and the Education of Young Children'. Very little consideration was given to Disadvantage and in fact the emphasis seemed to be on good, normal primary school practice with some bearing on children who were DISTRESSED rather than DISADVANTAGED. Of course disadvantage may be one cause of distress but is a very different thing.

Talking to colleagues I got the impression that many would have preferred the visits to have been earlier in the course as these did provide some clear issues for discussion, something which was sadly lacking on other occasions - but again not all the visits were concerned with disadvantage.

Another reason for my feeling of frustration was that the course fluctuated between the philosophical and practical aspects of education without really knowing which way to go. With the exception of two practitioners so much was indecisive, and in consequence the group discussions tended to become pleasant, anecdotal interludes. Some key points of guidance for discussion would have helped - we might even have arrived at some ideas on what needed to be done about various aspects of disadvantage rather than skate around the edges as we seemed to be doing most of the time.

My particular outburst about "parental involvement" reflects this indecisiveness - it is such an all-embracing, vague term. Taken as one of the main themes at the beginning of the conference we could really have got to grips with this, have clarified our thinking and sorted out some good practice.

George Corston

"I thoroughly enjoyed the stimulus of other people's viewpoints, particularly as I have been working in an isolated situation. I would make a couple of comments about things that struck me as a pity. Firstly, we seemed to be thrashing around for definitions and specific directions for most of the week which perhaps we didn't have time to do. I felt that our individual contributions could have been channelled better and that a more specific aim for groups would have overcome the rather wooly thinking. Secondly, we were all too kind about contributions and contributors".

Stewart Males

"As with all conferences, one of the main benefits is being able to meet colleagues with similar areas of concern and to be able to discuss different ways of tackling similar problems.

I found that one of the most useful sessions was the one given by Miss Brown talking about her school. This is obviously my main area of concern and therefore it is understandable that I rated her session very high - in fact, I hope to take some Head Teacher colleagues to visit her school later on this term".

Joyce Davies

"I found the conference interesting for two reasons: firstly, as someone involved in educational research, it is often useful to meet and talk to people involved in other aspects of children's welfare and I found the wide variety of views represented at the conference both stimulating and informative. Secondly, I was glad of the opportunity afforded by the school visits for a practical appraisal of education from a number of different viewpoints.

The only criticism I could voice is that the crusading nature of the conference occasionally led to the obscuring of real educational issues by the use of an emotive value - laden approach - educational disadvantage must be understood in terms of other social needs if its importance is to be properly assessed".

Richard Cyster

"I enjoyed the Conference immensely and appreciated how fortunate I was to be in discussion groups with so many interesting and experienced colleagues.

During the week we shared experiences on disadvantage, but also the advantages that occasionally shone through the disadvantages (i.e. the happy home situations of many Gypsy families who did not feel disadvantaged whilst in their own communities)".

Still thinking of practical involvement I found many of the papers prepared for the Conference by members made excellent reading. One remark which remains with me is 'Even if incomes cannot be raised, confidence can'. It seemed such a positive statement. I think we do sometimes forget that parents frequently need to be helped to cotninue and extend their parental role. Talking, I fear is still 'time wasting chatter' to some parents and also to some Infants' and Nursery teachers.

Joan Montague

"One thing that did trouble me somewhat and I didn't mention it at all, was the lack of any emphasis on the disadvantage of colour. There has been a recent CRE report on the particular needs of the West Indian Community. The latest issue of Education and Community Relations makes this a focal point. There is a feeling abroad in some quarters that the broad umbrella of disadvantage loses sight of the particular problems of the ethnic minorities."

Edie Garvie

"On the face of it there seemed to be big differences in the circumstances of the children being considered by the contributors to the conference with urban, rural even socially privileged group described.

Children and families under some kind of social stress perhaps provided the common feature and the education service has to devote what part it can be expected legitimately to play in helping both the children and adults concerned. It looks as though both schools, and other sections of the provided educational service, have got a widening role here in conjunction with voluntary and community organisations."

Colin Roberts

"Emotional deprivation is found in all classes of society and I feel it is the most difficult kind of deprivation with which to deal. Those most needing help may not be able to come to terms with their situation and I wonder how far a school can probe into the private lives of parents. We are very aware of these special problems in a University town where there is a high proportion of academic families where both parents can be heavily committed to their work and perhaps lead a hectic social life. All we can do is to be aware of these situations and try to build up a feeling of trust with our parents so we are able to communicate with each other".

Enid Turner

"I came away with a feeling of tremendous relief that people are now ready to distinguish very carefully between deprived children disadvantaged children, and children at a disadvantage.

It was also good to hear people voice doubts about holding on of the middle class ideas and ideals as the ultimate aim for all children. Is it such a crime to be truly happy in one's own environment? Perhaps we should ponder happiness more than we do - what is success? I suspect that real happiness is a perfectly valid form of success.

National think-layers can't be hurried, but I hope that more people will soon begin to feel the same caring and concern for mothers (father too) that they show for children. The mother/child relationships is the springboard for child's life and there isn't any 'spring' when attitudes are rigid or depressive, or when the vitality and happiness that should enforce a relationship aren't there.

I hope, too, that caring ambitious parents and concerned professionals will 'stop' trying to 'use' play to get children on, for that is the opposite of all that play is and can bring about naturally. If we abuse play we abuse childhood".

Brenda Crowe

Papers

1. Parent-Teacher Contact:
   Sam Johnston, Field Officer, Centre on Educational Disadvantage.
2. Mothers' Groups:
   Alan Wellings and Douglas Hubbard, Sheffield University.
3. Nursery Annexes in Hillfields, Coventry.
   John Rennie, Community Education Adviser, Coventry.
4. Home Start: A Voluntary Home-Visiting Scheme in Leicester:
   Margaret Harrison and Wyn Laxton.
5. The National Children's Centre Huddersfield: 2 Years On:
   Hazel Wigmore.
6. An Account of a Pre-School Teacher's Work:
   At Star Infants' School, Newham.
7. Parents as Para-Professionals in the Haarlem Pre School, Holland.
   Peter Elbers.
8. Teachers' Comments on the film "Country Children" about rural disadvantage:
   Brenda Crowe.

Contact addresses

Contributors can be contacted either at the following addresses or through the Centre.

Daphne Brown
Head teacher
Hillshott Infants
Letchworth
Herts

Brenda Crowe
18 Rainsford Avenue
Chelmsford
Essex

Joan Fazackerley
Senior Lecturer, Social Work
Mabel Fletcher Technical College
Sandown Road
Liverpool
L15 4JB

Dr Moira McKenzie
Centre for Language in Primary Education
Sutherland Street
London SW1

Stewart Males
The Smithy House
Blencarn
Penrith
Cumbria

I Mervielde
State University Ghent
Psychology Department
Blandynberg
B9000 Ghent
Belgium

A De Meyer
Education Bureau
Municipal Schools Ghent
Kammerstraat 12
B9000 Ghent
Belgium

Hazel Wigmore
National Children's Centre
Long Royd Bridge
Huddersfield

Pre-School Playgroup Association
Alford House
Aveline Street
London SW11

Save the Children Fund
157 Clapham Road
London SW9

The two films **"Country Children & "Parents in Playgroups"** are available for hire from the Churches' Television & Radio Centre
Hillside
Merry Hill Road
Bursley
Watford
WD2 1DR

Groups

1. **MISS D BROWN**

   Mr T I Ambrose
   Mrs M. Boye Anawomah
   Mr G B Corston
   Mrs J Davies
   Mrs D Day
   Mrs J Harrison
   Dr I Mervield
   Miss A Sharrock
   Mr A Thomson
   Miss H Wigmore

2. **MISS B A JACKSON**

   Mrs L Chambers
   Mrs B Crowe
   Ms Y Kilburn
   Mr S Males
   Mr A Melzack
   Mrs J Montague
   Ms R Peacock
   Mrs S Rankine
   Mr R Sheppard

3. **MISS E SEAMAN**

   Mr E J Beattie
   Mr R Cyster
   Mrs J Fazackerley
   Miss E Garvie
   Mrs V Ishemo
   Mr S Johnston
   Dr M McKenzie
   Mr C D Roberts
   Mrs B Wattles
   Mrs H Wurr

4. **MR A TRANT**

   Mr C R Beresford
   Ms K Blair
   Miss G P Collins
   Dr A De Meyer
   Mrs J Johnson
   Mrs J Lawton
   Mrs M Prendergast
   Mrs E Turner
   Mr W Van Der Eyken

Participants

Mr T I Ambrose
HMI.,Dept. of Education and Science

Mr E J Beattie
Social and Recreational Development Officer, Suffolk.

Mr C R Beresford
Cambridge Curriculum Development Centre

Mrs K Blair
Playgroups Organiser, Suffolk.

Mrs M Boyce-Anawomah
Playgroups Adviser, Save the Children Fund, London

Miss D Brown
Head Teacher, Hillshot Infants' School, Letchworth

Mrs L Chambers
Training and Development Officer Greater London Region PPA

Sir Alec Clegg
Chairman, Centre on Educational Disadvantage

Miss G P Collins
Principal, Saffron Walden College

Mr G B Corston
Area Inspector, Primary Schools, London Borough of Newham

Mr R Cyster
National Foundation for Educational Research.

Mrs J Davies
Senior Adviser, Nursery/Primary Education, Cambridgeshire.

Mrs D M Day
Field Officer, Centre on Educational Disadvantage

Miss E Garvie
Adviser for Multi-Racial Education Cambridgeshire

Mrs J L Harrison
Course Tutor, N.N.E.B. Manchester

Mrs V Ishemo
Clerical Officer, Centre on Educational Disadvantage

Miss B A Jackson
Area Inspector, Infants' and Nursery Schools, London Borough of Newham

Mrs J Johnson
Advisory Teacher for the Education of Young Childre, Area Educ.Off.Ipswich

Mr S Johnston
Field Officer, Centre on Educational Disadvantage

Ms Y Kilburn
Asst.Education Officer,Primary Schools, Municipal Offices, Leyton, London

Mrs J Lawton
Information Officer, Centre on Educational Disadvantage

Mr A Melzack
Technician, Centre on Educational Disadvantage

Mrs J Montague
Liaison Officer, Pre-School Education, Norfolk.

Mrs R Peacock
School Inspector, Department of Education and Science

Mrs M Prendergast
Head of Playgroups, Save the Children Fund, London

Mrs S Rankine
Playgroups Adviser, Save the Children Fund, London

Mr C D Roberts
HMI Director, Centre on Educational Disadvantage

Miss E Seaman
Headteacher, Norman First School, Norwich

Miss A Sharrock
Schools and F.E. Department, The British Council,London

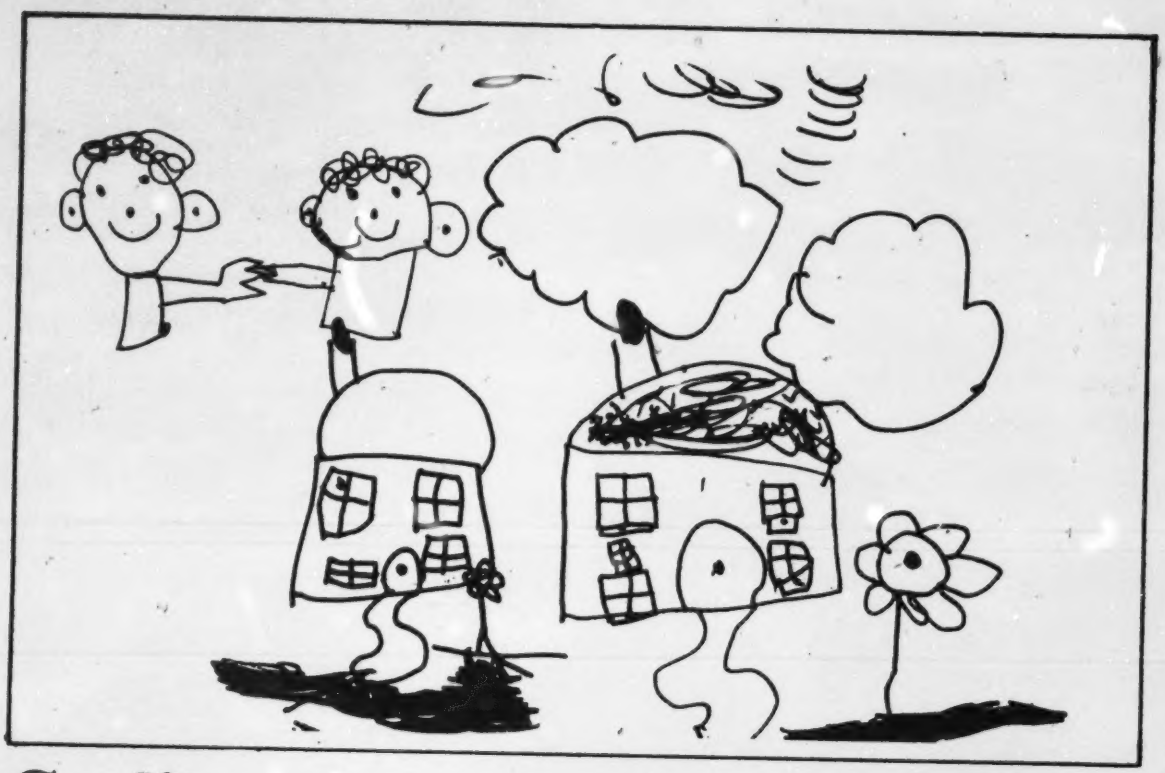
Mr R Sheppard
General Adviser, Bedfordshire

Mr A Thomson
Director, Hertfordshire Educational Television Unit

Mr A Trant
Director, Curriculum Development Department, Trinity College, Dublin.

Mr W Van Der Eyken
Social Science Research Council

Mrs B Wattles
Cambridge Specific Learning Disabilities Group



Credits

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